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ABSTRACT

An administrator who has been involved in the reorganizations of five school systems to create middle schools found that the reorganization improved delivery of educational services to K-12 students. A districtwide reorganization improves teacher morale by offering an opportunity for teachers to move to a different grade organization in their teaching assignment. Reorganization also provides opportunity and incentive for curriculum renewal at all levels, a strengthening of inservice programs, and an examination of the availability of resources between schools. Elementary schools can be reduced in size, and media centers updated. The politics of reorganization begin with involving staff, school board, and community with a comprehensive planning task-force approach. Leadership is important in determining the point of "critical mass"--when staff, school board, and citizens are ready to move forward and approve reorganization. Reorganizing requires long-term planning of 3 to 5 years. Three steps--setting short- and long-term objectives, monitoring them, and establishing a reporting system of activities related to goals--provides a road map for the administration. (MLF)

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MIDDLE SCHOOL REORGANIZATION - CONVERSION TO EXCELLENCE

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Over the last two decades, large numbers of school systems across this country have gone through the conversion process to middle school. The reasons for those conversions vary from desegregation plans, both voluntary and court ordered, to declining school enrollment or, in some cases, the realization that there is a need to improve schools. The urgent need to desegregate and consolidate has been a friend to the middle school movement, but that era is ending in the 1980s. Even without the impetus to further desegregate or consolidate, conversions to the middle school organization will continue, but at a slower pace. If a school district approaches a reorganization properly, there are many dividends to be gained outside of the scope of further desegregation and consolidation. I have been through five such reorganizations as an administrator in five states and in each instance, to varying degrees, we were able to improve the delivery of educational services to K-12 students. Within this article we will examine the potential impact in several areas.

PERSONNEL

Because of the effects of declining student enrollment, in combination with seniority clauses in most union contracts, our staffs generally have aged rapidly within the last decade. A reorganization of the school district allows the administration to provide an opportunity for teachers to have a "second chance" within their profession. In each instance where I have been involved in a district-wide reorganization, we have offered the opportunity for teachers to select the grade organization within which they want

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to teach on the other side of the reorganization activity. We have allowed them to make three choices and then attempted to grant as high a percentage of first choices as possible. As frightening as this process may appear to the uninitiated administrator, it invariably balances out the staff from a district-wide perspective. Surprisingly enough, teachers who opt out of the junior high school on the front side of reorganization for the high school on the back side, are balanced by the number of teachers who opt out of the elementary program into the new middle school program. We also always have a few elementary teachers who opt into the high school program and an occasional high school teacher who will opt into the elementary or middle school structures. This process allows a teacher in the mid or latter part of his or her career to try something new or different with minimal risk. Certification is always a restriction, but in each instance of reorganization we did a certification analysis prior to the implementation of the staff change, and found to our delight that we had a large number of teachers who held additional certifications at grade organizational levels other than the one in which they were teaching. This was an opportunity for them to try a new career experience. We always gave our teachers the option of voluntarily transferring back on a space-available basis for one or two years after the reorganization. In each instance we were able to provide between 90-96% first choice placements.

The result of this new activity is a new spirit following reorganization. The district has a group of teachers renewed, trying something different, challenged in a different way, and enthusiastic about what they are attempting often to a degree that they have not experienced since first entering the profession. The effect upon the district as a whole is traumatic. In each case, we have seen a sharp increase in voluntary in-service participation. Working with the principals in evaluation, we have seen significant numbers of teachers who were considered marginal improve their

instructional performance sharply. Obviously, this does not happen to everyone but it does happen for a large enough number that a significant difference becomes apparent across the school district. Invariably, we will have 4-10% of the teachers who were not placed in their first choice assignment. As with the teachers who have a chance over the one to two-year period to transfer back, those that did not receive their first choice assignment have a priority to transfer forward when a position is available. This process for personnel is not change for change's sake. It is an opportunity for teachers to renew at a low risk. This is the kind of employee renewal that many corporations dream about and few accomplish.

CURRICULUM

A movement to a reorganization that calls for middle school also provides an opportunity and incentive for curriculum renewal K-12. If the structural change calls for the sixth grade to leave the elementary level to join the new middle school, this is an excellent time to reexamine the curriculum being offered at the elementary level in the new K-5 centers and revalidate, update, and/or change what is being done. Remixing of the staff usually affects almost every elementary school. It is an opportunity for the administration to seize upon the new enthusiasm in order to reexamine what is happening within the instructional program. The opportunity for revisiting curricular practices in the new middle school structure is too obvious for comment. However, at the 9-12 level a tremendous opportunity is generated because of the addition of the ninth grade. A three-year high school must now reexamine its programs from a four-year perspective. This is often necessary because in the junior high school era, even though we talked of articulation betwee he high schools and junior high schools, in reality effective articulation programs are rare. The opportunity to reexamine the total high school curriculum picture from a four-year viewpoint rather than just "adding the ninth grade" should not be lost to a competent

administration. There are components of a good middle school program which will affect the high school as time passes. Those components should be seized upon and modified to fit the high school mission. I speak particularly to student-teacher advisement which is an integral part of middle school activity with a primary focus upon personal development. At the high school, student-teacher advisement should also be an integral part of the total program but the primary focus should be on academic career development along with personal assistance. The same program, a different mission. Some interdisciplinary teaming may also be valid at the high school level particularly at the ninth grade, as well as in some specified areas within the senior grades such as American civilization, for example, which combines language arts and social studies. However, interdisciplinary teaming at the high school level most often will not be utilized because of the mission of the high school to provide depth within subject area. In my view, the student-centered approach of a good middle school should also seep over into the high school. High school staff members, more often than not, have a tendency to teach subject matter; not students. That tendency needs to be balanced more in the direction of teaching students. One of our problems in large high schools across the country is the impersonality spawned by a lack of personal contact for students who reside in the middle of the spectrum. This group is the majority. They are neither discipline problems, outstanding academic scholars, nor laudable athletes; therefore, no one knows them. They are anonymous. Student-teacher advisement, along with a movement in philosophy to teach the student as much as one teaches the subject, begins to crack that barrier of anonymity.

IN-SERVICE

The reorganization of a school district presents a tremendous opportunity for the strengthening of an in-service program. Teachers must receive in-service as the curriculum changes and, as new teaching strategies go into effect, such as inter-

disciplinary teaming at the middle school level, student-teacher advisement at the middle and high school levels, new high school graduation requirements, and various other revisions that may emerge. Thus, the staff has the opportunity to revise at low risk. In this case, the in-service programs within the district should be examined in terms of their mode of delivery, size and scope. School boards are often more receptive to significant increases in in-service activities immediately following a decision to reorganize. In-service is required in order to implement changes. These are just some examples of the opportunities that come forward for a district going through this process. The other opportunities are numerous and most often unique to the school district.

STAFF EVALUATION

In the second year of reorganization another area that lends itself to renewal and possible revision is the area of staff evaluation. It is generally not a good tactical decision to revise the evaluation procedure during the first year of reorganization. During the second year staff members have had the opportunity to get used to their new positions and new modes of instruction and the time to reappraise the staff evaluation system becomes appropriate. Not only does the administration have the opportunity to review current evaluation procedures within the context of the new organization, different teaching modes and changing curriculum, but also staff members will more than likely see this evaluation renewal process in a positive vein as an attempt to better evaluate the way they are now performing as opposed to the way they performed under the old system. Therefore, districts have an opportunity to improve significantly the way they evaluate staff members.

LOGISTICS

The logistical opportunities to improve the effectiveness of a school district through this reorganizational process are large in number. For districts that are not facing

declining enrollment this may be an opportunity to reduce the size of elementary schools. It is true that the size of high schools will increase significantly. However, in terms of school size, smaller elementary schools are generally more of a significant help in a quest for excellence than the effect of lowering the size of high schools as long as those nigh schools are generally not larger than 2200-2300. For districts that are experiencing declining enrollment, the impact of adding the ninth grade to the high school level is not as severe, while at the same time, a choice can be made concerning the desired size of elementary schools.

In addition, many other opportunities abound as a district goes through this process. K-5 media centers can more effectively meet the needs of a reduced student population; while the addition of the sixth grade to the new middle schools calls for a weeding of those media centers, along with an opportunity to update the materials available for children. At the high school, with the addition of the ninth grade, the same opportunity exists. Because it is a time of change and a time when materials are redistributed across the district, an opportunity exists to examine equity between schools. By this I mean availability of resources. Staffing can be reexamined as a part of this process as well as the distribution of materials. The middle school, within this configuration, has different requirements than the junior high school which preceded it. Interdisciplinary teams generally produce more in-house material, request a wider selection of textbooks, and depend heavily upon the availability of supplemental material.

THE POLITICS OF REORGANIZATION

I. Staff Readiness Through Involvement

In most school districts, the need for reorganization is several years ahead of implementation. At first, it is a quietly discussed topic reviewed publicly

around budget time and at other junctures in the life of a school district that call for hard decisions relating to facilities and program. This is the germination time. A few staff members may be interested in the possibility of reorganization, while some are frightened by the prospect. Others ignore the possibility, hoping that it will never occur. A school board and administration, that recognize a need to reorganize their school district and want to capitalize on the opportunities inherent within the process in order to better their programs, has to overtly design a process that brings this generalized discussion to a meaningful head. Staff members must have the opportunity to become knowledgeable about the possibilities for improvement within the reorganization process. Formal in-service can be a small part of this activity but, in the initial stages, the program to develop awareness must be informal, casual, and comfortable to the participants. Books, pamphlets, journals, etc. are made available, not as required reading, but as stimulants of discussion. Attendance at seminars, conferences, and meetings dealing with the various components and opportunities within a potential reorganization have to be encouraged not just made available. When growing awareness calls for more formal action the community comes into play. That strategy is discussed in a latter part of this article. As staff awareness develops, carefully selected speakers and consultants need to be brought to the district for the purpose of analyzing the school system, its uniqueness, and discussing the opportunities that are available. Staff members at this point need direction to focus their interest and energies. During this process, the possibility of moving forward with a reorganization begins to take on the shape, the smell, and the taste of reality moving from theoretical discussion. As the board and the community begin to contemplate the outlines of the particular activities that they want to pursue, staff members become a combined force with members of the community in shaping a series of

recommendations concerning the future direction of the entire district. This element becomes a comprehensive planning activity and is a partnership process between staff and community.

II. Community Readiness Through Involvement

Once the staff is generally aware of the opportunities for the school district it is time to begin formal work with the community. Strategic discussions with community advisory groups need to be orchestrated across the district. I have utilized a comprehensive planning task force approach at various levels of sophistication in three school districts, with the most sophisticated form of the model having been used in Sarasota, Florida. Within this particular approach, a comprehensive planning task force is assembled made up of fifty percent staff members and fifty percent community members. Their focus is a five-year comprehensive plan laying out a series of goals and recommended procedures to obtain those goals sequenced over five years. The initial reorganization of the district occurs early within that sequence, to be followed by activities that are appropriate in each succeeding year. Staff members and community members may be selected through one of many different kinds of processes with the codicil that whatever selection process is utilized the task force members selected should be representative of both informal as well as formal power groups within the community and staff representing different socio-economic stratums as well as minority-majority groups, geographical areas, and any other characteristics that may be unique to a particular district. This group, if selected carefully, will be extremely powerful. They must recognize the inherent power that they hold and, with guidance by the board and administration, not abuse same. This involvement not only produces effective goals and plans of action unique to the needs of a school district, it also develops a grass-roots body of support for whatever is finally recommended to the school board and acted upon for implementation.

There are pitfalls. Occasionally this group may run ahead of the board. The group must also exhibit flexibility, recognizing that the board is the governing body with whom final decisions rest. However, in most instances the board finds a large measure of support within the comprehensive planning task force and the task force itself provides support and leadership to the board as it struggles with difficult decisions within a reorganization process. By supportive leadership, I refer to assistance from the general community. This assistance can be rendered through assisting the community in recognizing the need for financial support, general political support, or, in some cases, specific logistical help through the resources of community members. The comprehensive planning task force, through its influence and activities, prepares the community for change. It represents a consensus of the community from which the board can draw as it makes decisions.

III. School Board Readiness Through Involvement

Prior to beginning work with the staff and community, the school board has to recognize the need for comprehensive planning and the possibility that it may lead to reorganization. Encouraging board members to attend seminars, read journals, books, and other publications about the various components of reorganization that may apply to their school district is a helpful beginning. Visiting other school districts and talking directly with other board members on the scene of those school districts is particularly helpful in raising board awareness. As board discussion begins to evolve toward a need for action, the program of staff and community awareness should be ready for the comprehensive planning task force phase. As the comprehensive planning task force moves through its deliberations, the board members must be active listeners preparing, mentally to face the recommendations on the other end of that activity.

IV. Timing - Critical Mass

Critical mass in this parlance refers to the time at which members of the total educational community, staff, school board, and citizens are ready to move forward and resolve an issue. The ability to sense this readiness is a skill (some say a gift) that is characteristic of excellent leaders. Critical mass within a sociological structure is very difficult to determine objectively. It is a subjective phenomenon that requires a subjective decision most often based upon intuitive knowledge. A skilled politician running for office who senses that he or she is going to win or lose before the support organization senses the same thing represents an example of intuitively understanding when critical mass is present in a sociological situation. That politician is in the vortex of the storm of election and accumulates bits and pieces of information that standing alone are meaningless, but combined, produce subjective evidence that causes that person to understand what is going to happen. Both the school board and administrative leadership in a district need to be able to intuitively understand when critical mass is present in the decision-making process.

Each process of decision making within a community has a time of critical mass. If this time passes, momentum begins to deteriorate at an accelerating pace. The community begins to believe that nothing will happen. Excitement over the positive possibilities resulting from change quickly abates and a reverse psychology sets into the process which makes the effort to rally toward another critical mass on the same issue more difficult. The greatest obstacle blocking the understanding of the presence of critical mass is fear, most often spawned by insecurity on the part of leadership. School district leaders, be they board

members, staff, or citizens, must be confident that what they are doing is right and will prove beneficial. The exhibition of that confidence not only helps to stimulate the development of critical mass, but also helps to produce effective implementation. There are some signs that can help district leaders recognize when critical mass is present. They are as follows:

A. Leaders will begin to hear back from members of the community including both formal and informal leaders that the ideas which they had originally stimulated are positive and personal ownership in those ideas is indicated.

B. Unsolicited discussion among staff members and citizens begins to revolve around the concept of "after we make the decision certain things need to happen". The psychology expressed is the acceptance of the idea that the decision will be made in a positive manner and change will take place and, therefore, thinking has shifted from "what if?" to "when it happens ".

C. Informal leaders who have, for the most part, been supporters all along, begin to publicly exhibit some frustration saying in essence, "Let's get on with the job."

D. If additional financial resources are required, one begins to hear back from members of the community the idea that the resources needed to be generated and the taxes required should be assessed. One additional point under this category speaks to media. Although, newspapers most often picture themselves as leaders as much as reflectors of society, I have found that more often they reflect than lead. They will only join a train after it leaves the station, most often not

before. Newspaper editorial support (from respected newspapers) is an indication of the presence of critical mass.

E. At public meetings and/or hearings concerning the proposed changes, members of the audience as well as community leaders and staff members, begin to answer critics directly. The board and administration find that they no longer stand alone. Extremists who filibuster the board concerning the matter at hand begin to find themselves chastized by the rest of the audience.

These are just a few of the more obvious signals that communicate critical mass. As the secure school leader works within the decision-making process, these elements and others begin to come together. That leader must recognize that the window of time in which to act is relatively short; often weeks, sometimes days. The preparation for potential action must have been in place well ahead of the apparent presence of critical mass. The leader at this juncture must move concisely with speed, efficiency, and displaying confidence.

V. First Blush

As the first year of implementation begins, with prior groundwork having been accomplished and decisions made within a reasonable time frame, a district should have the advantage of the "halo" affect. Things are new and different, yet challenging. The leadership of the educational community must focus upon the challenging opportunities that are before the school district as a result of reorganization that lend themselves to increased excellence and, therefore, success. Positive staff reinforcement must occur through events; not just

through verbal plaudits. Broad-scale teacher involvement in conferences in a listening mode now changes to a situation where those teachers share what they are doing as much as listen to the progress of other districts. Opportunities within the district for communications between teachers from different schools must be provided.

As the district moves into the interior of its first year, the administration and board must be prepared for the "February Syndrome". The "February Syndrome" usually occurs at about that time during the first year of implementation and is characterized by staff members having produced a tremendous effort to implement the new programs and new arrangements while at the same time the excitement of a new challenge has passed and a temporary state of exhaustion is evident. This is a time for "pick me up strategies". It is not a time for intensive evaluation on the part of educational leadership, negativism about what may have gone wrong, nor serious introspection. It is a time for activities, primarily social in nature, planned by the educational leadership, that say to the staff "we appreciate what you are doing;" "we appreciate how hard you are working and this is how we show our appreciation." Low-key social events, such as after school get-togethers including staff members, administration and board alike, are very effective. This is not the time to bring in more outside consultants and increase pressure. Conversely, it is the time to decrease pressure. If your reorganization is successful, your staff has done well. Ease back and let your staff taste some of the fruits of their labor. After reorganizing various school districts, I have heard staff members say that they have never worked so hard, but that they would not return to the past.

If you are fortunate enough to have other districts ask to come and visit your schools so that your staff members may share what they are doing, encourage

such activity. This kind of activity is even more beneficial for the morale of your staff than it is necessarily helpful to the representatives from visiting school districts. It says in essence, "we are important," "what we're doing is important, and our administration and school board must believe that because they are inviting other districts to see what we are doing." An element of pride becomes a part of the overall atmosphere within the district.

After you conclude the first year and move into the second, make sure that your staff members who now have a year of experience behind them become a major ingredient in the development of in-service programs at all levels. This has occurred in the past but you, as an administration and school board, have taken the majority of the leadership prior to reorganization. That leadership now needs to shift toward the instructional staff based upon their experience.

Reorganizing to create better opportunities for the school district to move forward is not a one, two, or three-year proposition. Events need to be scheduled spanning three to five years. Stay with your time line. Your teaching staff expects that time line to be kept and looks forward to it. Districts that view reorganization as a short-term, one-shot situation inevitably lose credibility and do not achieve their long-term goals. Communicate regularly with members of the task force that developed the comprehensive plan for your district. In Sarasota County we established a check-off pattern of objectives with time lines. Activities within that check-off pattern over the five-year plan are reviewed with the school board twice annually, and once annually a progress report is sent to all members of the original task force. Some members have since left the area; we communicate with them as well. That helps to spread the word across the country about your activities. It also produces increased

credibility as you look toward the second five-year plan at the end of the first cycle.

We have also instituted a monitoring audit that was accomplished half-way through the five-year cycle. This was accomplished by a new task force made up of citizens and staff members, approximately 50% of which had served on the original task force and 50% who were new. They analyzed progress to date by spending four months interviewing staff members, community members, visiting programs and doing whatever they felt was necessary to validate progress in relationship to objectives. The result of this monitoring task force has been to further increase the credibility of the original plan as well as activities that have followed. This produces even greater credibility as the district prepares to cycle into the second five-year comprehensive plan. This whole effort and process focuses the school district on objectives both short and long-term. It allows the school district to deal with issues over a period of years thus reducing management by crisis. Obviously, in a school district of any size or complexity, crises will occur and boards will have to take action to respond to unforeseen events. However, with good comprehensive planning and a reorganization to match the agreed-upon objectives, the necessity of crisis management is reduced.

In addition, budget debates are also reduced when the board can refer to objectives established through a community-staff effort and agreed upon by the board. Critics of individual budget allocations that are a part of the comprehensive plan, particularly when they are goals that are to be achieved over several years, have a more difficult time defeating those allocations that allow the district to move forward to meet established objectives.

A track record of activity past is in front of the board and, therefore, they are armed to utilize that activity as a defense in moving forward in the future and completing the objectives. A tracking and reporting system of activities related to goals provides an excellent, clear, road map for the administration. It also constantly reinforces the community perception that the district has clear goals and is moving decisively forward to meet the objectives within each goal area. The abundance of work involved in this process is compensated by pride in progress.